

## Chapter Eight

# *Only Yesterday: A Hebrew Dog and Colonial Dynamics in Pre-Mandate Palestine*

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In Sevilla there was a madman who had the strangest most comical notion that any madman ever had. What he did was to make a tube out of reed that he sharpened at one end, and then he would catch a dog on the street, or somewhere else, hold down one of its hind legs with his foot, lift the other with his hand, fit the tube into the right place, and blow until he had made the animal as round as a ball, and then, holding it up, he would give the dog two little pats on the belly and let it go, saying to the onlookers, and there were always a good number of them: “now do you think it’s an easy job to blow up a dog?” Now does your grace think it’s an easy job to write a book? (*Don Quixote, Part 2, Prologue to the Reader*)

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Some ten years after publication of the first part of *Don Quixote*, Cervantes sees fit to liken the art of writing a book to that of inflating a dog from behind with a straw. Without a doubt, S.Y. Agnon—the great Nobel Prize-winning Hebrew prose writer of the twentieth century—was aware of this text. Indeed, *Don Quixote* was translated from Russian into Hebrew in 1912 by Ḥayim Naḥman Bialik (himself the founder of modern Hebrew poetry), and Agnon could have read the full text in any number of languages.<sup>1</sup> Yet even laying aside questions of literary influence, the persistence of the figure of the dog suggests that the dog is not a just a characteristic of the text itself but is actually an aspect of a self-consciousness behind the text—perhaps in the very same way that Cervantes invents the novel, more or less, through the idea of the novel as a text of self consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

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Our awareness of Agnon's familiarity with *Don Quixote* also reminds us of the dog's impurity in the traditional Jewish mindset; in such a context, the novel is already an impurity harkening to the Gentile world.<sup>3</sup>

Agnon's masterpiece *Only Yesterday* features one of the best-known dogs in Hebrew letters, "Balak". Since its appearance, *Only Yesterday* has been perceived as literary achievement that is also a sacred history, even more true perhaps than "real history"—a history of the Second 'Aliya.<sup>4</sup> *Only Yesterday* has a complex composition-history: significant parts of it were written in the nineteen-thirties, yet the work became Agnon's main project only after he finished writing *A Guest for the Night* in 1939.<sup>5</sup> At least partly, then, *Only Yesterday* is a novel written largely during World War II—and though it tells the story of the second wave of Zionist immigration to Palestine (ca.1905–1913), it remains Agnon's immediate artistic response to the war in Europe. In this essay, I will show how *Only Yesterday* addresses the questions of Zionism and the Jewish condition in Europe by viewing through a colonial and post-colonial lens the relationship of protagonist to the dog as a figurative discussion of Zionism. Although Zionism has been repeatedly discussed as a colonizing settler movement, the process by which determinations of race, color and ethnicity have emerged in Palestine has remained largely unexplored.<sup>6</sup> I will demonstrate that Agnon's treatment of Balak the dog shows just how painfully aware Agnon was of the murky position Jews in Palestine held within the colonial world and the violence with which their place in Palestine was to be established.

## The Narrative

*Only Yesterday* tells the story of a Galician Zionist youngster named Isaac Kumer, who (with a vague notion of Eretz Yisrael) leaves Eastern Europe for Palestine.<sup>7</sup> Aspiring to become an agricultural laborer, he ends up a house painter, inserting himself into an anti-Zionist Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) community in Jerusalem. During a fateful encounter with Balak the dog, Kumer uses his paints to write on the dog's skin *Kelev meshuga'* (Hebrew, "mad dog"). Balak is quickly ostracized by all—and in act of final vengeance bites the man who wrote on him. The end of the novel finds Kumer dying from the bite of the dog made mad by the words written on his skin. To quote Melville's Ahab, the story is a case of "madness maddened".<sup>8</sup>

Since its publication, the novel has been perceived as a narrative of Agnon's view of the beginnings of Zionism, a morally-coherent national allegory in which Balak plays a major role.<sup>9</sup> This is the starting point for my reading of the novel, which will affirm the novel as a national allegory—though by undoing the stability of the authorial position, I will suggest a new understanding of the novel's main enigma: Balak the mad dog and Isaac Kumer, the human who maddened him.<sup>10</sup> The departure point for such a reading is the historical disjunction generally ignored by Zionist readings between Zionism in Palestine under British rule and the near-incomprehensible period of Zionism under Ottoman rule.<sup>11</sup> *Only Yesterday* is remarkable for portraying the world of Jewish Palestine before World War I and the coming of the British by a participant writing from a distance.<sup>12</sup> As such, it is (among others), a novel about colonization and the changes in identity politics brought on by the passage from Jewish subjection under the Ottoman Empire to the era of the British mandate and Zionist dominance. Though the novel never employs an overtly-political tone, it is nevertheless one of the most interesting discussions of this complex process. The colonial dynamic of Zionist immigration to Palestine under Ottoman rule operates in diverse and conflicting modes that stand at the core of the difficulty of understanding Zionism within a colonial or postcolonial framework.<sup>13</sup>

Arriving from an (East) European context into Ottoman Palestine in the beginning of the twentieth century, Kumer the immigrant and the local dog Balak can be seen as sharing a unified subjectivity—at least in light of a complex structure of inscribed subjectivity.<sup>14</sup> As Dan Miron tells us, it is this very structure that begs explication, and our begging does not go unrewarded.<sup>15</sup> Balak has been at the center of interpretive attention since Baruch Kurzweil first wrote about the novel as it appeared in 1945.<sup>16</sup> Without going into the details of the many important insights brought forth by the story's various readers, one can say that they all view Balak as a certain representation of Kumer.<sup>17</sup> In turn, all questions regarding the processes of meaning and signification may be explored, as long as they are anchored in the fundamental representation of the *Jews qua* Jews with respect to the dog, a representation assumed stable because of Agnon's biography and the absence of another coherent allegory; though such stability in an explicitly-unstable textual environment probably implies an excessively-stable concept of allegory.<sup>18</sup>

It is precisely this stability that reveals the power structure of Hebrew literature as a discipline and which a so-called postcolonial

reading seeks to disturb; seen through the lens of a field bent on undoing the kind of actions that Kumer has done to Balak, the two reveal themselves to embody a complex colonial dynamic that is hardly exclusively Jewish.<sup>19</sup> Within such a reading, Balak the “inscribed dog” can be read as a colonial subject to a colonial Kumer, already “inscribed with Jewishness” as seen through enlightened European eyes; already colonized, Kumer is a postcolonial subject manifesting his liberation on the dog.<sup>20</sup> This is almost the inverse of what Sartre writes in the introduction to Albert Memmi’s *Colonizer and the Colonized*: “No one can treat a man like a dog without first regarding him as a man”—one cannot treat a dog like a man without first being regarded as a dog.<sup>21</sup>

It is in this context that Franz Fanon’s seminal *Black Skin White Masks* can be read as an autobiography of Balak; replacing Fanon’s Negro with a mad dog, maddened by a Hebrew inscription, Fanon’s work sounds alarmingly like Balak biting back:

The Blackman has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man. Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself. His metaphysics or, less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him.<sup>22</sup>

The source of this degrading duplicity, says Fanon, is that Blackman and Jew, are forced to *be* in relation to the White who establishes his whiteness as superiority.<sup>23</sup> One need only think what would happen to *Only Yesterday* if Kumer had only written: “Dog” instead of “Mad Dog”. The difference might be subtle; it would be almost as if matter-of-factly pointing out: “this is a dog”.<sup>24</sup> Yet a fact can never be just that; that which is pointed out is already different from that which *is*. Furthermore, the dog carries the weight of a discourse in which it is seen as an impure animal, a figure of derided alterity, permitted only grudgingly by rabbinical literature.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Balak is useful as a vehicle for understanding colonial inscription, since Balak reveals the actual content of the inscription to be secondary to the act itself—and in fact, a sign uncannily like “Dog” marked the Jew—“Jude”.

Like Fanon’s Negro, emancipation has put the Jew into two frames of reference: “The Jew and I: Since I was not satisfied to be racialized, by a lucky turn of fate I was humanized. I joined the Jew, my brother in Misery.”<sup>26</sup> In Fanon’s analysis, the supposedly universal category of

“Human” exposes the duplicity inherent in the very categories of European humanistic discourse. Subsumed by these, the Other is accepted—though this is always a concession.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the space of acceptance is also rejection; this is one way of understanding the asylum and this is also where the madness of the dog enters into the picture. Madness is central to the novel, as dealt with extensively by Ann Golomb Hoffman in an Oedipal key. Hoffman’s reading provides insight into the dynamic of Balak and Kumer—while Agnon or, rather, the text points away from such a reading and towards the modern social context of Balak’s madness by differentiating the *Kelev meshuga* from the *Kelev shotte* (literally, the difference between “crazy dog” and “mad dog”). Applying the modern term to the dog, Agnon makes it clear that he is referring to the modern malady with a modern history with which he himself engaged extensively in *A Simple Story*.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Balak relates to the very idea of sanity after Kumer marks him, just as the Jews relate to “nativeness”—a category from which they have been excluded.<sup>29</sup> As it turns out, to become a native has little to do with actually being “of a place”; Balak’s madness and the Jew’s nativeness are both determined from the outside. Rather, Balak’s madness has little to do with his own mind and everything to do with what he is inscribed with—thus, it is precisely what can be read onto the Jew, denying his native-ness.<sup>30</sup>

Balak finds himself racialized and classified by Kumer, the Jew, a product of the Galician version of European enlightenment—a process that can easily be seen as emblematic of the colonial.<sup>31</sup> Kumer marks him, in two strokes—one that creates order and another that is self-empowering; by virtue of inscribing a weaker native with otherness, he becomes master (as often happens in the Postcolony).<sup>32</sup> Not easily defined as a place and a time (though both are implied), what is intended here is the movement in space and time beyond a discourse of emancipation as processes of gaining worth in terms of the colonizer.<sup>33</sup> It is the “Mad” in “Mad Dog” which exposes the nature of this act as a complex negotiation of the colonial dynamic and movement beyond it. In *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler deals with the issue of naming, describing it as collaboration between Althusserian interpellation and Foucault’s theory of power, where what is in a name is all that is left out of it.<sup>34</sup> The result is that Kumer’s act of naming Balak is neither an act of inspiration nor “pure caprice” (as Todd Hasak-Lowy has it), but rather a reenactment of trauma:<sup>35</sup>

If we understand the force of the name to be an effect of its historicity,

then that force is not the mere causal effect of an inflicted blow, but works in part through an encoded memory or a trauma, one that lives in language and is carried in language. The traumatic event is an extended experience that defies and propagates representation at once.<sup>36</sup>

Within the novel there is no doubt that Balak defies and propagates representation, and the text comments on the force involved, offering us to rethink Balak as the traumatic site of the psyche formed under colonial pressure, where the perverse nature of the “universal” human is exposed precisely because he interacts with a non-human dog endowed with (Hebrew literary) consciousness. In fact, it is in Balak and his inscription that we best understand the nature of the Jewish trauma that is reenacted by Zionism in the Land of Israel sending its once-considered long-lost brothers (natives) into exile.<sup>37</sup>

In a well-known letter concerning the interpretation of Agnon’s novel, Agnon scholar Baruch Kurzweil wrote that Balak and Kumer exposed the horror “*Shemdat ve-shelomidat*” (when applied to psychoanalysis, understood to indicate “consciously and unconsciously”). Yet when we view Kumer and Balak through the perspective of colonial power, we see what Hanna Arendt already suspected: that the real horror is not in knowledge or the lack of it but rather in how people can be so innocent while inflicting the worst.<sup>38</sup>

Balak and Kumer do not stand in relation to history—rather, their relation is their historicity. However, most readings see *Only Yesterday* at least in part as a historical novel, and this complicates readings of Balak as a fragment of Kumer’s psyche. History is certainly not absent from the text, but since it is expressed in the relation between man and dog there is little meaning to the question if in the novel Agnon is simply “reacting” to the destruction of the Shoah. Already in *A Guest for the Night*, Agnon anticipates the destruction of European Jewry, and *Only Yesterday* is (among others) obviously a comment on the dynamics of inscription and genocide that fuel it, without needing to refer explicitly to the kinds of inscriptions that would become the sign of Auschwitz.<sup>39</sup>

In fact, the encounter between Kumer and Balak is striking precisely for the innocence and ingenuity of it all. At first, Kumer even writes the word *Kelev* (Hebrew, “dog”) “*bi-ketiva tama*” (Hebrew, “in calligraphy”)—a phrase that in Hebrew is composed of the words “writing+ innocence”:

We don't know if, from the start, he meant to write what he wrote, or if in the end it seemed to him that he wrote with malice and aforethought. But why should we get into that doubt, we had better look at his act. And so, by the time Isaac stood up, he had written in calligraphy on the dog the letters d-o-g. He patted his back and told him, From now on, folks won't mistake you, but will know that you're a dog. And you won't forget that you're a dog either.<sup>40</sup>

Let us review how this act unfolds: first, all that is written is a "fact", a simple signifier directly attached to a signified. Yet even a simple act of naming framed within authorial commentary is not in any way neutral. It is only later, almost as an afterthought, that the word "mad" is added. The casual addition of the descriptor "mad" is set in motion by a machine they both do not fully understand. In this case, Balak and Kumer are not so much an expression of one personality as of a complex colonial dynamic with a colonized, Kumer accessing his post by inscribing and in a sense colonizing Balak. The question of whether Kumer is himself a colonized subject is not easily answered, though arguably his interaction with Balak is part of a trajectory perceived as liberation.

As a remark on Zionism the figure could be interpreted along the lines of Daniel Boyarin's observations in *Unheroic Conduct*. After analyzing Jewish masculinity in Europe and Freud's particular position within it, Boyarin observes that: "Herzlian Zionism imagined itself as colonialism because such a representation was pivotal to the entire project of becoming 'white men'".<sup>41</sup> Boyarin acknowledges that in practice, the meaning of such a construct is that Zionism cannot be an imitation of European colonialism without being a response to the experience of Europe as colonialism. At least in terms of masculinity this creates an unstable position that (following Bahbha) is phrased in terms of colonial mimicry, only to conclude that Herzl's remedy is found in the inscription of Zionist maleness on the body of Palestine and Palestinians.<sup>42</sup>

The question that first comes to mind here is whether or not Zionism is Colonialism. However, answering in the affirmative and in the negative both mislead, since Jews do not have access to that fundamental category of colonialism—nativeness. The distinction between native and settler—as Mahmood Mamdani has famously put it—is always a distinction at the heart of the colonial situation and is a matter of legal regimes. That is, one can never become a native from the point of view of ethnic citizenship "[s]o long as the distinction

between settler and native is written into the structure of the state”.<sup>43</sup> Such distinctions can be written into the state in many ways and could explain why Jews in Europe can be (and should be) seen as colonized, at least in the sense that laws are required to emancipate them as part of the failed project of European Enlightenment.<sup>44</sup> In other words, Boyarin’s view does not explain Kumer’s resistance to whiteness, manifest in his return to the Haredi community (distinguished by its black clothing) that need not be interpreted as a Zionist failure if the Zionist endeavor is understood as “going native” and the difference between the two as one of color.

One can almost say that when Balak bites back it is not only a rejection of white colonialism, but it is also an act in which the native inscribes the Jew with whiteness, designating him as a non-native European settler. It is, after all, an act of revenge or an establishment of justice; the settler must pay for the upheaval he causes in the world of the native. The nature of this violence *qua* retribution is further demonstrated in the 1929 riots. Novel in the Zionist interpretation precisely because the violence against the Jews made no distinction between the Old Yishuv (composed of Jewish religious communities as old as any in Palestine) and the New Yishuv (composed mainly of European Zionists).<sup>45</sup> The change Zionism effected through its collaboration with the British colonialism is inscribed in the natives of all religions and ethnicities. The Jews that have always resided in Palestine, cannot remain unchanged by this process, and in this sense it does not matter that Balak is a Jewish Hebrew “speaking” dog.

By all accounts, the arrival of Zionism in Palestine irrevocably changed the natives, Jews and non-Jews. The (colonized) Jews retained a deep ambivalence and antagonism towards their colonial British agents. Some of this ambivalence is present in the very color of the administrative term “White Book” (Hebrew, “*Ha-sefer ha-lavan*”: Arabic, “*al-Kitāb al-abyaḍ*”). Aptly-named, these books contained British legislation on Palestine differentiating White Papers from Blue. As these “white” colonial reports regulating the “colored” colony came to limit Zionism over time, whiteness became an object of hate. Literature written by Jews from the Yishuv in the British army during World War II shows more or less the same dynamic as the Jews struggle to come to terms with their nativeness in the eyes of the British.<sup>46</sup> The lively debate in the Yishuv about enlistment employed the classic rhetoric of anti-colonial discourse, and (at least initially) the color of the Jews in Palestine cannot easily be seen as white.<sup>47</sup>

This detour of sorts reveals that the instability of color and identi-



ties is (at least in part) what causes Kumer to paint the obvious on the dog's hide. Balak, famously is unexceptional, but his instability of color has been overlooked by interpretation even though his fateful meeting is with a painter (Hebrew, "šabba")—a man that colors:

As he was about to wipe his brushes, he chanced upon a stray dog, with short ears, a sharp nose, a stub of tail, and hair that looked maybe white or maybe brown or maybe yellow, one of those dogs who roamed around in Jerusalem until the English entered the land.<sup>48</sup>

To the post-colonized eye and to that of the author, Balak is underdetermined, and this helps explain why Kumer first inscribed the word "dog" (*kelev*)—so that all, Balak included, will know that he is a dog. The power relation here is obvious and is underlined as the act of inscription is described; Kumer writes: "like a clerk stroking the paper before he wrote."<sup>49</sup> Writing on Balak, Kumer is more a colonial bureaucrat than he is a writer or an artist, even if the act is "inspired". Inscribing a mimicked order hardly his own, he robs the native dog of proper being and a fluid identity—a fluidity that appears to be other than natural only from the cataloging point of view; and he adopts (like many other Zionists) a "Western" or "Westernized" gaze in encountering Palestine and its natives both Jew and Arab.<sup>50</sup> Of course, it is the added word "mad" (Hebrew, "meshuga") that turns Balak into a subject, subjecting him to persecution and entering him into language.<sup>51</sup> Yet, even this process unfolds in terms of color: "Isaac smiled and said to him, Are you crazy? You want me to make spots on your skin, or do you want me to paint your name in gold?"<sup>52</sup>

Kumer's playful banter is very serious; "What else do you want?" he asks the creature he named, raising the idolatrous possibility that the dog wishes to become a golden dog (or perhaps a golden calf of sorts). Kumer is also clearly alluding to Jeremiah 13:23: "Can the Ethiopian (Black) change his skin, or the leopard his spots?"<sup>53</sup> Yet Kumer turns the biblical verse on its head, asking instead if the dog can become a leopard, leading most innocently to the rhetorical query, "Are you crazy?" The dog's supposed madness is in wanting to become what he is not, by doing the impossible and changing color—an impossibility not so far removed from the change Zionism seeks to effect in the Jews. Yet, just like madness, color—or at least its meaning—is defined and inscribed by a supposed normality whose transparency is colored white. In writing on Balak, Kumer recalls the

custom of announcing a *herem* (Hebrew, “excommunication, boycott”), taking pride in his work because it is part of a tradition. It is not easy to determine what this means, but perhaps, like Balak’s later diatribe of origins, it points to the well known (re)turns to tradition, in which both colonized and colonizer turn to history in order to retrieve resistance and justification.<sup>54</sup>

Balak, wondering at these signs, seeks the approval of the master. Kumer is turned into the master by virtue of being the one holding the pen; but instead of reassuring Balak, Kumer proceeds to kick him and even to draw his blood:

Isaac hit his leg and it bled. He barked a vague bark and then a whining bark, picked up his feet and started running . . . He ran and didn’t know where he was running. And wherever he ran he came on something that hurt him. Here he was pricked by a thorn and there he was hit by a bracket in front of a wall, here by a ram’s horn and there by road markers. From the hair on his head to his toenails there wasn’t a limb that wasn’t hurt. He stood still and looked at those who wished him evil and was angry and bitter that he left the place where he was living and went to a place of calamity. He barked a bark of, Oh, woe, in me that human parable is fulfilled. The dog deserved the stick and got a beating.<sup>55</sup>

Balak experiences a rude awakening to what could be read both as a parable of the Jewish situation and as a colonized consciousness. Once he has been inscribed, nothing is the same, and a meaning which he cannot control or defy has a hold over him. As Bahbha explains, the moment of inscription is also the moment of the inscriber being bitten—although this not a moment of parity, the action of inscription is always reflective. Though the difference between the two remains, they also become inseparable to an extent.<sup>56</sup> Balak, who has lived his uncolored life among the Jews, turns into a “Jewish Dog” (Hebrew, “*kelev yehudi*”). What follows is a grotesque reenactment of Jewish history taking place in what Ariel Hirshfeld describes as a grotesque space.<sup>57</sup> Balak, the wandering Jew dog, is exiled from his home but can find no alternative one. In the process, he invents his mythology and he becomes a celebrity—an item for the nascent mass media.<sup>58</sup> What is usually seen as Balak’s twisted scientific study of “Balakness” seems more to be a parody of the new social science of the Jews, explained by Martin Buber at the Fifth Zionist Congress (1901) as a shift from *Wissenschaft des Judetums* to *jüdische Wissenschaft*—a turn with Zionist

ramifications aptly described by Mitchell Hart as “Jewish culture through the social sciences”.<sup>59</sup>

Balak is not the only dog in *Only Yesterday*. If we wish to claim (as some have) that the dog represents the libido or the subconscious, then all dogs must play along. Though dogs will be dogs, it is quite clear that Balak sees himself also as a figure—the dog that appears in the parable, “The dog deserved the stick and got a beating”. The unbelievable musicality of this phrase in Hebrew cannot be reproduced but it will suffice to notice that dog, stick and beating are composed of almost the same letters in different configurations.

The simple meaning of the parable is that one gets what he deserves—like many a victim and certainly like many Jews at the time, Balak blames himself for the violence perpetrated against himself by others. Here, Balak links himself to a dog that appears earlier in the text, the silk dog on the bed cover of Kumer’s lover Sonya. Sonya is a non-religious woman Kumer courts when in Jaffa, and who is at least partly-responsible for his crisis of masculinity, as Kumer discovers that he is ill-equipped to deal with the intimate aspects of the change he himself undergoes by immigrating to Palestine.

The following passage appears after Kumer visits Sonya—significantly, the first visit he has ever made to a girl’s chamber. Feeling quite virile, he meets an Arab guard (Hebrew, “*shomer*”) and tells him about the dog with a stick in his mouth:

Isaac comes back from Sonya’s, happy and goodhearted, and since he is happy—he is happy with everyone. There’s a night guard near Isaac’s house, a poor and wretched Arab who has nothing but his dog. Isaac comes and chats with him. He pulls the dog’s ears and praises him to his face. Said the guard, What do you say my brother, this dog is handsome. A dog that was stolen from me was handsome. His skin was as brown as the eyes of a doe. Said Isaac, Brown skin you want? Tomorrow, you’ll have a brown dog. Said the guard, you’ve got one like that? Said Isaac, You want a red one, tomorrow you’ll find a reddish one. Said the guard, A kennel of dogs you have, my brother? Said Isaac, Not even the tail of a dog do I have. Said the guard, You conjure them up by magic? Said Isaac, Various colors do I have, and if you want, I’ll paint your dog brown or red or yellow or green. Said the guard, Never have I seen a green dog. The guard laughed and they laughed together.

Said Isaac, I saw a dog that held a stick in its mouth and didn’t let go of it for a moment. Said the guard, Was it made of sugar? Said Isaac,

No, of silk. Said the guard, Such a dog doesn't bite and such a stick doesn't beat. Said Isaac, Who Knows? The Guard rolled back his lips and laughed. Said Isaac, Don't you believe it? Said the guard, I would take the stick out of the dog's teeth and hit the dog with it. Said Isaac, Who is like unto you? (plural) You even hit your own women. Said the guard, He who is worthy of the stick gets beaten. Isaac laughed and the guard laughed.<sup>60</sup>

This loaded and lengthy passage actually includes the phrase that Balak later uses when he is kicked by Kumer. Clearly, Kumer's involvement with dogs in general and with Balak in specific has some sort of connection to questions of sexuality and power. In terms of a figurative discourse, these questions are all entangled in an allegorical fabric that is impossible to undo—in which color and labeling are the other face of sexuality and power.<sup>61</sup> Kumer would like to be transformed in both aspects, to have power and a new masculinity, but he is unable to undergo both transformations; and what he does achieve with Balak is an abuse of power that is superficial at first, but then becomes just real enough to kill him.

From a literary point of view, the passage refers directly to Moshe Smilansky's story "Abū 'l-Kalb", (Arabic, "Father of the Dog"), with the guard in the image of Abū 'l-Kalb, a black Arab named after his beloved white dog, loved and killed for the whiteness desired by his master but ultimately unattainable.<sup>62</sup> Yet this allusion is minor compared to the explosiveness of the reference to the guard (Hebrew, "shomer") and guarding (Hebrew, "shemira") in context of the second Aliya.<sup>63</sup>

For David Ben-Gurion, "the conquest of the (Arab) guard/defense" (Hebrew, "kibbush ha-shemira") was the single most significant achievement of the Second Aliya and of the Zionist revolution.<sup>64</sup> This can be seen in Ben-Gurion's biography, particularly in the way he presented (or rather fabricated) his own role in the Shomer organization in the second edition of the Yiddish *Yizkor Book* of 1917.<sup>65</sup> In the story, the exchange between Kumer and the guard operates on a level of duplicity that oscillates between banter and serious commentary on power and its nature. Would it be exaggerated to say that the stick which Kumer and the Arab *shomer* discuss is a figure of real power and control of the land itself?

The guard calls Kumer "brother" and at first he is even naïve, while Kumer is rather distant, condescending, and ironic. Kumer then points out that he is not the proprietor of dogs, but rather the wielder of the brush/marker. The Arab's reply shows just how quickly innocence

turns to irony, and as he realizes the nature of the discourse they both laugh. The conversation takes a more serious turn when Kumer speaks of Sonya's silk dog holding a stick. The figure of power is as clear as the advice itself. What the Arab suggests can be read in sexual terms but can also be seen as being about the ethos of the guard (Hebrew, "*shomer*"). Just like the Second Aliya's battle for the "conquest of labor", "conquest" of the guard is in fact all about taking the stick from the "dog" and beating him with it. If we consider that the conquest of both involved an elaborate and consistent drag show of Arabness, from the dress and performance of *Ha-shomer* (The Guard) to the *Palmaḥ*, it seems the Jews in Palestine followed this man's advice to the letter.<sup>66</sup> The guard's adage that he who deserves the stick gets it foreshadows what Balak will understand; though it is perhaps a bit odd as a reply to Kumer's admiration of Arab use of power "even on your women". Like Balak, the guard blames the victim.<sup>67</sup> In fact, at the end of the book when Balak returns to Me'a She'arim he reaches this exact conclusion:

Where do the sticks get their power to hit if not from the dog who attracts the stick to him. The proof of this is that, as long as the stick doesn't see the dog it doesn't hit him. And not only the stick, but also human feet, as long as they don't see the face of a dog they pass by or creep by. If so, why should I be scared? And if the stick is strong, my voice makes it droop, and if the human feet are strong, my teeth terrify them.<sup>68</sup>

This is Balak, returning from "exile". After being chased out from all communities in Jerusalem suffering hunger and thirst, he returns to Me'a She'arim, the ultra-orthodox neighborhood where Kumer is about to make a life for himself. As a discussion of the power relations we have seen established between the various figures of the text, it seems safe to say that Balak's return is a version (albeit a quirky one) of Zionist return, undertaken even against better judgment:

Said Balak, I know that if I got to Meah Shearim I'll end up killed, but even so I will go, for all my being is there already, and if my tail wanders here, the core of my vitality is there. And I don't need to seek an intelligent reading, for the will is reason enough for everything.<sup>69</sup>

The end of the affair is grim and well-known: Balak bites Kumer but not in search of truth (as some have said), but out of anger and vengeance. If we understand allegory in the same way as Paul De Man,

then we will also be free from having to determine precisely who is an allegory of what: Kumer and Balak are indeed an allegory, but they are also many allegories of an allegory—and therefore our understandings must remain temporary, tentative, and unstable. If Balak and Kumer relate through their historicity, then we are also thankfully relieved from the Zionist need to justify Kumer's death as closure of a morality tale.<sup>70</sup>

Indeed, vengeance and paranoia are the meaning of this ending, as they are so often the driving force of postcolonial relations. Balak seems to become mad only after Kumer tries to emancipate him; one can almost say then that Balak chooses madness. This—and not the tragic view of history and man's futility already well-established in Agnon's other works—is the real novelty in the ending of *Only Yesterday*.

In many unsettling ways, Jean Amery engages the same issue in discussing Fanon. Amery, a philosophically-bitter survivor of Auschwitz, tries to understand the difference between Jewish revenge in World War II and the rebellion and revenge of the colonized discussed by Fanon. In "In the Waiting Room of Death", Amery explains that Auschwitz is part of colonial Europe, but that the Jew was totally alone and therefore had none of the hope of those colonized in Africa. All the Jew could attain by rebellion was death. Balak's rebellion and revenge are not much different—he is just as alone, with the only dignified option being to choose his own demise by taking the enemy with him. Therefore, Amery sees ghetto rebellion as the locus of the Jew's post colonization—like Balak, through vengeance and not through desire for the colonizer and what he possesses. The allegory stops here; and the following statement of Amery's can be read to refer both to Kumer and Balak in equal measure. The future remains open, but it already has a history of colonial violence—perhaps like all futures:

In revolt, that of Warsaw or also that in Treblinka, the Ghetto Jew, while totally preserving his qualities, transcended himself and attained to an entirely new ontic dimension. He was the prey who bore within him a two-thousand year history of humiliation, But for one moment he became the hunter, not for the joy of hunting but from the will to remain who he was and at the same time to become another . . . Thanks to the insurgent Jews in some camps, above all in the Warsaw Ghetto, today the Jew can again look at his own human face, as a human being"<sup>71</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Bialik translated an abbreviated version that does not include the prologue to the second part, though his introduction to the work clearly points to the connection between Don Quixote and the ideas of Zionism; see H. N. Bialik, *Works and Selected Translations* (Berlin: Hebrew Poetry Lover's Press, 1923): 17 (Hebrew).
- 2 On this issue that is far from resolved and a fine argument against the neatness of such descriptions through a discussion of the Russian Formalists' view of *Don Quixote*; see Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders* (London: Verso, 1997): 276–279.
- 3 Though written in jest, the fictive rabbinical minds of the scholars of the Boca Raton Theological Seminary are troubled by a real problem, see *How to Raise a Jewish Dog* (New York: Little, Brown, 2007). On Agnon and the problem of the novel (and specifically *Don Quixote*) see Dan Miron, *Under the Motley Canopy* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibuts Ha-me'uhad, 1996): 68–69 (Hebrew).
- 4 See Avino'am Barshai, *Critical Essays on Agnon's Writing*, Volume 2 (Tel Aviv: Open University, 1992): 259–314.
- 5 Sarah Hagar, "Only Yesterday the Creation of the Structure and its Unity", in Gershon Shaked and Rafael Weizer, eds., *S.Y. Agnon: Studies and Documents* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1978): 154–194 (Hebrew). It is evident that the stories of the man and the dog were initially written separately, only to be brought together in the mid-thirties; this has been a topic of some discussions about the novel.
- 6 See Neve Gordon, *Israel's Occupation* (Berkeley: University of California, 2008): 93–115.
- 7 The term *Eretz Yisrael* (Hebrew, "The Land of Israel") is common in current English; and conveniently sidesteps the question of Palestine.
- 8 Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: Modern Library, 2000): 242.
- 9 For a thorough discussion of the the existing literature on the novel and Balak in particular see: Boaz Arpaly, *Masternovel* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibuts ha-me'uhad, 1998): 224–238 (Hebrew); from a poetic point of view see Michal Arbel Tor, *Written on the Skin of a Dog* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2006): 198–254 (Hebrew).
- 10 Obviously the terms of this discussion would have been foreign to Agnon though they remain relevant to the text, see: S. Y. Agnon, *Only Yesterday* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
- 11 This is not for lack of historical writing, but it is obvious that the Ottoman period in Palestine is the "dark ages" of Zionism, overcome by the enlightenment brought by British colonial rule and its commitment to Zionism. See Beshara B. Doumani, "Rediscovering Ottoman Palestine", in Ilan Pappé (ed.), *The Israel/Palestine Question* (London: Routledge, 1999): 10–35.
- 12 The other major novel of the period, Y. H. Brenner's *Breakdown and Bereavement* (London: Toby Press, 2003), was written before and during

- World War I and was published shortly thereafter, and actually describes a very different dynamic in terms of the colonial experience.
- 13 The complexity of this process cannot be dismissed by recognition that “Zionism is both a liberation movement and colonial settler one at the same time”; see Ella Shohat, *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29.1 (Autumn 1999): 5–20.
  - 14 That Kumer and Balak are parts of a unified character has been suggested before (though in a very different mode): see: Arapali, *Masternovel*, p. 231. For Arpaly, Kumer and Balak are like a man and his dream, which means that the relation is allegorical.
  - 15 See Dan Miron, “From Parable to Genealogy,” in Emuna Yaron, Rafael Wisner, Dan Laor, Reuven Merkin (eds.), *An Agnon Miscellany* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000): 109 (Hebrew).
  - 16 One of the first commentators on the book, Meshulam Tuchner, predicted that future generations would busy themselves with this endless figure; see *The Meaning of Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Masada, 1968): 63–93 (Hebrew).
  - 17 Even when undoing it, as Ann Golomb Hoffman’s eloquent psychoanalytical reading assumes this concept of allegory; see Ann Golomb Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return* (Albany: SUNY, 1991): 125–148; see also Todd Hasak-Lowy, “A Mad Dog’s Attack on Secularized Hebrew: Rethinking Agnon’s ‘Temol shilshom’”, *Prooftexts* 24.2 (Spring, 2004): 167–98. A forthcoming book in Hebrew by Shira Hadad provides an exceptional semiotic reading of the affair.
  - 18 Although Agnon is, of course, a Jew, yet it is far from clear what this means. However, there is no reason to conflate Agnon’s biography with the text of his writing, as his biography makes clear; see Dan Laor, *S.Y. Agnon: A Biography* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1998): 318 (Hebrew).
  - 19 On the complex and at times contradictory views of the terms see: Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 2005): 13–23; One must also heed the warnings against the slippage of such critique into the neocolonial order, cf. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003): 112–115.
  - 20 This statement begs a discussion that is out of place here, but essentially views this “Jewishness” as a product of Enlightenment and as part of a colonizing discourse. See: Aamir Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007): 27–41.
  - 21 See: Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon, 1965): XXVII.
  - 22 Franz Fanon, *Black Skins White Masks* (New York: Grove, 1967): 110.
  - 23 It seems that this simplified process is exactly how race is established in colonial discourse; see, for instance Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Race before Racism”, in Paul Bové (ed.) *Edward and the Work of the Critic: Speaking Truth to Power* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000): 61–74.



- 24 It is precisely this point that forms a blind spot in Bernard Williams' daunting discussion of truth, in *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002): 6. The following demonstrates the depth of the figure: "If dog is an 'arbitrary' sign for a dog, it is in any rate a sign for a dog, and that must mean that it can refer to a dog: and a dog is a dog, not a word."
- 25 See Talmud Bavli Soṭa 4, and the essays in this volume by Meir Edrey, Sofia Menache, and Joshua Schwartz.
- 26 Fanon, *ibid.*, p. 111
- 27 For a critical discussion of humanism in Fanon, especially concerning Fanon's critique of Mannoni, see Lou Turner, "Fanon Reading (W)right, the (W)right Reading of Fanon, in Robert Bernasconi, Sybil Cook (eds.), *Race and Racism in Continental Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003): 151–175.
- 28 S. Y. Agnon, *A Simple Story* (New York: Schocken, 1985). At the closing of a thorough discussion of the mental illness and its treatment in the novel, Miron suggests that writing about mental illness in the book is what allows for a shift in Agnon's poetics and allows for *Only Yesterday* to end as it does; see Dan Miron, *Le Médecin Imaginaire: Studies in Classical Hebrew Fiction* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibuts hame'uḥad, 1985), pp. 234–235 (Hebrew).
- 29 The question of the Jews and nativeness is complex and is usually dealt with in view of the Canaanite movement, there are some serious problems with this discussion and they have to do with the inability of Zionist thought to conceptualize a shared nativity with the local Palestinians. For further discussion see Ḥanan Ḥever's *Producing the Modern Hebrew Canon* (New York: New York University Press, 2002): 101–117
- 30 On the struggle to develop nativeness within Hebrew letters, see Ḥanan Ḥever, *From the Beginning* (Tel Aviv: Keshev, 2008) (Hebrew).
- 31 The history of Jewish enlightenment (Hebrew, "Haskala") within Europe is incredibly complex in all accounts; Galicia has a central place as it is within the sphere of German enlightenment and Jewish Italian forms of Haskala. See Shmuel Feiner, *Haskalah and History* (Oxford: Littman, 2004): 105–209.
- 32 On this dynamic and the creation of the native as an irrational non-actor see Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001): 187: "Thanks to this name given by the settler, the native will become a fragment of the real, an objective thing, matter."
- 33 *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12, Mbembe makes a general comment on Jewish emancipation designating it as "in recent times".
- 34 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech* (London: Routledge, 1997): 25–36. Her analysis is that "interpellation regularly misses its mark" and is therefore "inaugurative not descriptive" (p. 33). Balak exposes the difficulties with the neatness of such a view—he is a dog no doubt, and he does end up mad—though that can surely be seen as the compulsion of interpellation.

- 35 Todd Hasak-Lowy, "A Mad Dog's Attack on Secularized Hebrew: Rethinking Agnon's 'Temol shilshom'", *Prooftexts* 24.2 (Spring, 2004):167.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 37 I wish to sidestep here the rather complex field of trauma studies, though one must mention recent consideration of the Palestinian disaster (Arabic, "Naqba") in terms of trauma—see Hanan Hever, "Don't Tell in Gat", *Şedeq* (2010): 9–43 (Hebrew).
- 38 One can argue that innocence rather than banality is the essential insight she develops during Eichmann's trial, see *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Penguin, 1994).
- 39 If one views the relation between Kumer and Balak as historicity, then one must also disagree with the opinion that the camp is the paradigm of modern biopolitics, since it seems also to be the paradigm of colonialism. It is in the death camp that finally the economic veil of colonial practice is raised and one sees colonialism for what it is: a practice of writing on the skin of the human continuum the determination of fate, or as Kertesz puts it, the forcing of one upon the human that is existentially fateless. It is impossible to do justice to the voluminous body of work that deals with these issues, but one must mention Marc Nichanian's exceptional work, *Historical Perversions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), for an illuminating discussion of many of these matters; see also Roberto Esposito, *Bios* (Torino: Einaudi, 2004): 115–124; Uri Cohen, "Agnon's Modernity", *Modernism/Modernity* 13.4 (2006): 657–671.
- 40 *Only Yesterday*, p. 286.
- 41 Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997): 302–303.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 307; for a more detailed and critical discussion of the issue, see Michael Gluzman, "Altneuland as a Gender and Sexual Utopia", in *The Zionist Body* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibuts ha-me'uhad, 2007): 34–66 (Hebrew).
- 43 Mahmood Mamdani, *When does a Settler become a Native* (Capetown: Capetown University Department of Communication, 1998): 7; Pal Ahluwalia, "When Does a Settler Become a Native?: Citizenship and Identity in a Settler Society", in Gaurav Desai and Supriya Nair (eds.) *Postcolonialisms* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005): 500–513.
- 44 This failure can be seen as the very essence of European modernity, see: *Enlightenment in the Colony*, pp. 37–39.
- 45 One can well argue that the riots were a result of the changes in the equilibrium in Palestine during the time and in fact most of the participants in the riots were not residents of the city, The ethnic interpretation of the riots led Ben-Gurion to the view that the political significance of the riots rested in the fact that for the Arabs the extermination of the Jews became a political option. As wild as this might sound, these are Ben-Gurion's precise words when founding Mapai, the Labor party that led Israel in its

first 30 years. See David Ben-Gurion, "Our Political Direction After the Events", *Ha-po'el ha-ša'ir* 7–8 (1931) (Hebrew).

46 There is a vast amount of literature on the subject mostly personal accounts of service, but some works of literature, see Yiṣḥaq Lamdan (literary ed.) *The Book of Volunteering* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1949) (Hebrew); Yigal Qimḥi, *In the Tents (Ba-ohalim)* (Jerusalem: Masada, 1944) (Hebrew).

47 Of course, after the state is founded and immigration from the Arab countries reaches a crescendo, they are immediately designated as blacks compared to Ashkenazi whiteness; see Yiṣḥaq La'or, *Narratives with No Natives* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibuts ha-me'uḥad, 1995): 105–114 (Hebrew). The oddest example of this ambivalence can be found in the 1948 novel *Who Said He is Black*, which describes relations between neighboring Jews and Arabs turning bloody before the outbreak of the 1948 war; see Igal Mossenson, *Dare One Say His Skin Is Black* (Tel Aviv: Po'alim, 1948) (Hebrew).

48 *Only Yesterday*, p. 286.

49 The translation here should have been "smoothing the paper" ("ke-lavlar she-maḥliq et ha-niyar qodem ketiva"), p. 286.

50 On these matters little has been left unsaid; for an astute synthesis that strives to explain all of Zionism as settler colonialism, see Gabriel Peterberg, *The Returns of Zionism* (London: Verso, 2008): 65–69.

51 I realize this is a claim that has been the subject of much study; the use of the terms here is based in the end on a Foucauldian view. Cf. Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1995). See especially pages 95–96 where the question of colonial subjectivity is treated through Gayatri Spivak's observation that Foucault (like much of the field) remains an astute observer of the colonizer, whose formation is not at all the same as that of the colonized.

2029edc1ae0c56728040581748bb5eA3 ebruary 52 *Only Yesterday*, p. 286. This is clearly a reference to the story of the Golden Calf in the book of Exodus. There is no evidence that gilded dogs were ever worshipped; see Howey Oldfield, *Cults of the Dog* (London: C.W. Daniel, 1972): 25.

53 This is the King James translation. The Hebrew "kushi" clearly indicates "African" as opposed to "Ethiopian"; cf. David M. Goldberg, *The Curse of Ham* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003): 17–25.

54 Partha Chatarjee, *The Nation and its Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993): 27–32.

55 *Only Yesterday*, p. 288.

56 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994): 67.

57 Ariel Hirschfeld, "Warped Space and Grotesque in *Only Yesterday*", *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 15 (1981): 49–59 (Hebrew).

58 In *A Guest for the Night*, Agnon comments that nothing good had come from this sort of publicity as the gentiles only learn from it what could be done to the Jews; see Dan Miron, *In the City of Slaughter: A Visit at Twilight* (Tel

- Aviv: Resling, 2005): 106–119 (Hebrew). At the risk of overreaching, I would note that the name Balak (though resembling that of the biblical *Balaq*) bears an uncanny resemblance to “Bialik”—perhaps a literary allusion to Bialik can be read here. On the complex and not indifferent relations of Agnon and Bialik, see Hayim Be’er, *Their Love and Their Hate* (Tel Aviv: ‘Am ‘oved, 1992) (Hebrew).
- 59 Mitchell Hart, *Social Science and the Politics of Modern Jewish Identity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000):39.
- 60 *Only Yesterday*, pp. 141–142.
- 61 For a thorough discussion of the Zionist project in terms of literature and masculinity, see Michael Gluzman, *The Zionist Body* (Tel Aviv: Ha-qibbuṣ ha-me’uḥad, 2007) (Hebrew).
- 62 Moshe Smilansky, *Sons of Arabia* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1945): 33–37 (Hebrew).
- 63 There are good reasons to suspect continuities of Hebrew power in the twentieth century, but there is little doubt that the period of the Second Aliya is seen as a major turning point within these continuous narratives. See Shaul Avigur, *With the Generation of the Haganah* (Tel Aviv: Ma’arakhot, 1951) (Hebrew); see also Yosef Hagorni, *Zionism and the Arabs 1882–1948* (Tel Aviv: ‘Am ‘Oved, 1987) (Hebrew).
- 64 For a knowledgeable (though certainly skewed) view of the process, see Anita Shapira, *Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to Power 1881–1948* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).
- 65 A. Heshin, David Ben-Gurion (eds.), *Yizkor* (New York: Palestine Workers of Zion Committee, 1917) (Yiddish).
- 66 The period and the topic are well researched and yet there is little recognition of the layers and meaning of this desire by the “authentic representatives” of the new Hebrews to be (like) Arabs. See: Netiva Ben Yehuda, *1948 Between Calendars* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1981): 175 (Hebrew).
- 67 This is not a matter of “Arab” or “Islamic” culture as some claim later; in fact, Edward Said was most sensitive to the perversity of the claim. See Edward Said and Christopher Hitchens, *Blaming the Victim* (London: Verso, 2001).
- 68 *Only Yesterday*, p. 623.
- 69 *Ibid.*, p. 601.
- 70 Paul De Man, *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983): 187–228.
- 71 Jean Amery, *Radical Humanism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984): 26–33.

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